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Africa Policy: Abrupt U.S. Reversal on Angola

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WASHINGTON, June 22—Seven weeks ago, Carter Administration officials were seriously considering the possibility of indirectly supplying sophisticated American weapons to a force waging guerrilla war against the Marxist-led Government of Angola. This week, having presumably abandoned the idea of arms aid, the Administration ranking diplomat to Angola is discussing specific collaboration and more normal relations with President Agostinho Neto.

There have been few reversals in the recent conduct of American foreign policy that seemed as abrupt or complete as this one. The juxtaposition of the two projects was only one factor in the demands, in Congress and elsewhere, for a clarification of United States objectives in Africa.

The motives for sending Donald F. McHenry, a senior member of the United States delegation to the United Nations, on the Angolan mission were clear, however. President Neto's cooperation will be essential both for stabilizing Angola's border with Zaire and for the success of a five-nation effort to bring South-West Africa, also known as Namibia, peacefully to majority rule and independence.

In a speech two days ago to the United States Jaycees at Atlantic City, projecting a "positive" African policy, Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance said an agreement between Zaire and Angola was imperative to prevent future incidents such as the invasion of Zaire's Shaba Province by exiles based in Angola.

"In this connection," he said, "we believe it could be helpful to increase our consultations with the Angolan Government and begin working with it in more normal ways in order to improve the prospects for reconciliation between Angola and Zaire, as well as for achieving a peaceful settlement in Namibia."

Less than 24 hours later, Mr. McHenry was on the way to Luanda, the Angolan capital.

Collaboration Held Indispensable

State Department officials have always insisted that President Neto's collaboration would be indispensable for a solution of the Namibian problem because the South-West African People's Organization wages its guerrilla war from Angolan bases against South African authorities in the territory.

But the question still unanswered is why, if Mr. Neto is indispensable both for a Namibia settlement and for stabilizing the Angolan-Zairian border, the Administration so recently considered helping his internal enemies in their effort

to overthrow or undermine his Government?

The rationale given in official circles was that aid to the anti-Neto forces would tie down many of the 20,000 Cuban soldiers in Angola, preventing their deployment in other African trouble spots, especially in support of black nationalist guerrillas in Rhodesia.

State Department officials insisted that the idea of aiding the National Union for the Total Independence of Angola, known also as UNITA, had never become Administration policy and would have been blocked in any event by the Clark amendment, which bars American military aid to anyone in Angola.

The author of the amendment, Senator Dick Clark, Democrat of Iowa, said last week that he was "very much inclined to believe" that President Carter had not even been aware of the plan. Adm. Stansfield Turner, Director of Central Intelligence, had presented the proposal to Senator Clark as one under consideration in the National Security Council.

"One high-ranking Administration official said today, however, that Admiral Turner 'was never really interested in doing anything in Angola,' and that the C.I.A. had 'discouraged the possibility of doing anything' whenever the subject had been raised."

Whatever the status of the arms aid plan at any stage, Mr. Vance's speech made it obvious that the Administration was now taking a positive approach toward Dr. Neto, discarding even the tactic of charging Angola with heavy responsibility for the Shaba invasion, something President Carter had done as recently as May 26 in Chicago.

Message Sent by Neto

Officials emphasized that an important factor in the change and the decision to send Mr. McHenry to Luanda was a message Dr. Neto had sent to Washington in the last 10 days, specifically offering to cooperate in stabilizing Angola's border with Zaire.

They pointed out that even in advance of this overture, Dr. Neto had announced in a nationwide broadcast that Katangan rebels returning from Shaba with weapons would be "systematically disarmed and taken to the refugee camps."

Some State Department officials even saw a gesture for cooperation in Angola in a message that President Fidel Castro of Cuba gave May 17 to Lyle F. Lane, head of the United States "interest section" in Havana. Mr. Castro acknowledged that Cuban authorities had heard in advance of the plan to invade Shaba and said they had tried unsuccessfully to stop it.

Those officials in the Administration who have long urged the opening of a dialogue with Dr. Neto despite his Marx-

ism and his heavy reliance on the Soviet Union and Cuba, hope cooperation on the Zaire and Namibia problems may lead to formal diplomatic relations.

They are keenly aware, however, that unless Angola's circumstances change dramatically, President Neto is unlikely to consider sending home any great number of the Cubans. He regards them as essential for security and the functioning of his Government.

Washington, which regards so large a force of Cubans as a factor for instability in central Africa, has always insisted on the withdrawal of substantial numbers as a condition for agreeing to exchange ambassadors with Angola.

Rebels Have Strong Support

Even without American arms, the UNITA movement seems to be well entrenched in parts of the southern third of Angola where its leader, Jonas Savimbi, commands strong support from the Ovimbundu people, who constitute nearly 40 percent of Angola's population.

In the tiny enclave of Cabinda to the north—in one of the many ironies about Angola's situation—Cuban forces are defending, against another guerrilla force supported by Zaire, installations of the Gulf Oil Company that pump 100,000 barrels daily and contribute about \$600 million annually to Angola's budget. If Zaire and Angola could be persuaded to agree to stabilize their border, the threat to Cabinda could be eliminated along with the danger of new Shaba invasions and counterattacks on Angola by anti-Neto forces based in Zaire.

If the five-nation initiative on Namibia could succeed in bringing that territory independence, it would mean the elimination of conflict along Angola's southern border and the withdrawal of South African troops, whose incursions are feared by Dr. Neto.

That would leave the problem of UNITA as Dr. Neto's last rationale for the presence of so many Cuban troops on his territory. Some Administration officials still believe it might be possible to negotiate an agreement between Dr. Neto and Mr. Savimbi for the establishment of an Angolan government of national reconciliation.

On his recent Washington visit, President Kenneth D. Kaunda of Zambia, one of the most influential black African leaders, said he was still urging Dr. Neto to attempt such a reconciliation as the only practical way of bringing lasting peace to Angola.